

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



Sonoran Pronghorn

Antilocapra americana sonoriensis

Region:

Southwest

Area affected:

Southern Arizona

Climatic change:

Drought

Impact:

Mortality

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

The Sonoran pronghorn is a critically endangered subspecies of America's fastest land animal. Pronghorn—sometimes mistakenly called “antelope”—range across much of the West and have a top speed of almost 60 miles per hour, fast enough to outrun their long-extinct predator, the American cheetah. Pronghorn are distinct in appearance, with their black noses and horns and “collared” markings on the upper chest. Sonoran pronghorn are uniquely adapted to desert life: they are smaller-bodied and lighter-colored than other pronghorn, which helps them stay cooler, and they can eat cactus and other tough desert vegetation in addition to grasses and broad-leaved plants. These pronghorn have also adapted to shift their fawning and mating season to correlate with precipitation patterns in the desert. The last remaining populations of the Sonoran subspecies occur in southern Arizona and Mexico.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

The U.S. population of Sonoran pronghorn has the distinction of having very nearly been driven to extinction by a severe climate event: a 13-month drought in Arizona in 2001 to 2002. This intensely dry period devastated pronghorn habitat. Vegetation dried up and already scarce water sources vanished. **The population plunged from about 140 animals to just 19 due to the drought.** Wildlife managers had to resort to emergency measures to save the species, initiating a captive-breeding program and embarking on an ambitious project to create artificial water sources and forage plots in wildlife refuges within core Sonoran pronghorn habitat. These dedicated efforts have increased the Sonoran pronghorn population to several hundred, but the threat of future drought impacts still looms large.

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013. Bringing Sonoran Pronghorn Back from the Brink. <http://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/SonoranPronghornRecovery-2013.pdf>

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